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China's Bomb

Fallout Over Asia

By TILLMAN DURDIN

HONG KONG—China watchers have by now become accustomed to the fast pace of Communist China's nuclear weapons development. They were, therefore, impressed and concerned but not particularly surprised when Chinese scientists detonated Peking's first hydrogen bomb over the Takla Makan Desert at dawn on the morning of June 17 in the record short span of two years and eight months after they had set off the first nuclear blast ever to occur in China.

From the time of the first American atomic explosion it took the United States seven years to devise and test fire the world's first hydrogen bomb. It took Britain and Russia four years. France will not explode a hydrogen bomb until next year, eight years after achieving her first nuclear blast. Communist China detonated a hydrogen device after only five previous nuclear test firings. Other nuclear powers had the experience of dozens of atomic blasts before moving to hydrogen explosions.

Remarkable Achievement

It is true that Communist China's nuclear energy team, believed to be headed by Dr. Wang Kan-chang, has profited by the pioneering of others. He, like several of his top associates, studied in the United States (at the University of California) and later, like most Chinese nuclear physicists, imbibed Russian know-how at the Soviet Atomic Research Center at Dubna. But even in light of this scientific background and the expectations of Western experts, the Chinese achievement is nevertheless remarkable in so short a period of time.

Spectacular though the nuclear progress is, the achievements of the Chinese still leave Communist China a long way from being a major nuclear power.

The capacity of Chinese Communist centers at Lanchow and Paotow for producing enriched uranium and plutonium is limited. Western specialists estimate Communist China may now have 25 to 50 atomic bombs and the ability to produce a dozen or more a year.

Despite their scarcity, the menace of Communist China's present small nuclear arsenal would be formidable if Peking had the capability

of delivering warheads on targets accurately and at long range. This capability, however, is lacking. Communist China is known to have some 160 old, World War II type bombers that could carry nuclear weapons from 700 to 2,000 miles, but they are very vulnerable to modern fighter planes and anti-aircraft missiles. Peking's armament further includes short-range missiles that could project nuclear bombs several hundred miles but, as far as is known, no medium-range (1,200 to 2,000 miles) and certainly no long-range missiles suitable for nuclear bomb use. It might also be possible for the Chinese to deliver nuclear bombs from submarines with their present short-range missiles.

Limited Striking Power

While Communist China thus has a moderate nuclear capability around her frontiers she has no appreciable striking power beyond this. Indeed, though Communist China has exploded a hydrogen bomb and France has not, France's sizable atomic bomb arsenal and medium-range missile capability make her considerably more weighty than Communist China as a nuclear power.

The Chinese are doubtless working with beaverish zeal to remedy their deficiencies. With their nuclear weapons program, by common consent of all factions, kept from involvement in the turmoil of "the great proletarian cultural revolution," they can be assumed to be concentrating now not only on perfecting their nuclear warheads but also on developing the missiles that will be needed to make them accurate and effective weapons.

It is believed here that Communist China's next scientific "spectacular" may be the test-firing this year with a nuclear warhead of a medium-range missile. The development of an intercontinental missile would soon follow. This would not mean the early Chinese acquisition of an important medium or long-range missile capability. It would take Peking years to build up a missile arsenal.

Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara said in Congressional testimony made public last month that not before mid-1970 would

Communist China be able to have any significant number (on the order of 50 or 75) of I.C.B.M.'s. An appreciable number of medium-range missiles might be possible somewhat earlier than this.

Thus Communist China is on its way, and fast, as a nuclear power. Even now it has the capability of dealing shattering blows at neighboring states, possibly even Japan, but it is very far from big power class and could not pose a serious threat to the United States for many years to come.

The psychological impact of the bomb in Asia has been greater than the effect of its purely military potentialities. Among non-Communists the level of unease clearly has been rising and conversely, Communists in Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia who look to Peking have received some measure of psychological boost, though the more sophisticated among them well know that a Chinese hydrogen bomb at present can be of little real benefit in the kind of warfare and political struggle they are waging.

But most non-Communist countries around China's periphery are either directly or implicitly under the protective nuclear umbrella of either the United States, Britain or Russia, and in view of this Asians well know that Communist China at this stage is in no position even to threaten, much less attack, neighboring states with nuclear weapons. This, it is believed, will be the position for years to come.